

The Jersey Devil

From the NJ Historical Society:

Most tellers of the legend of the Jersey Devil trace the devil back to Deborah Smith who emigrated from England in the 1700s to marry a Mr. Leeds. The Leeds family lived in the area of the NJ Pine Barrens (Leeds Point, Galloway Township, Atlantic County). Mrs. Leeds had given birth to 12 children and was about to give birth to her 13th. The story goes that Mrs. Leeds invoked the devil during a very difficult and painful labor and that when the baby was born, it either immediately, or very soon afterwards, (depending on the version of the story), grew into a full-grown devil and escaped from the house.

Another version of the story says it was when Mrs. Leeds found out she was pregnant with her 13th, that she said that if she were to have one more child, "may it be a devil".

Another version is that the child/devil was the result of a family curse.

Another version is that Mrs. Leeds, who was a Quaker, had refused to be converted from the Quaker faith and that the clergyman who had been trying to convert her was so angry that he told her that her next child would be an offspring of Satan.

Another version is that the child was born a monster and that Mrs. Leeds cared for the child until her death. In this version the child/devil "flew off" into the swamps after Mrs. Leeds' death.

People in the 1700s still believed in witchcraft and many people of the period felt a deformed child was a child of the devil or that the deformity was a sign that the child had been cursed by God.

It may be that indeed Mrs. Leeds gave birth to a child with a birth defect and given the superstitions of the period, the legend of the Jersey Devil was born.

In any event there do not seem to be any subsequent reported encounters with the Jersey Devil in which he/it actually harmed anyone.

In the last 200 years or so, there have been a number of "sightings" and the hearing of eerie noises/wails in the forests which have been attributed to the Jersey Devil, but since these accounts are, in the main, generic descriptions, one is somewhat drawn to the conclusion that any number of "weird" things in southern Jersey are attributed to the Jersey Devil as a matter of course.

Over the years the Jersey Devil has been called by a number of names, "Hoodle-Doodle Bird", "Wozzle Bug" and the "Leeds Devil".

This is all not to say that people do not believe in the Jersey Devil. Many over the year have believed and reported sightings of the creature.

Sightings included one in 1870 by a Long Beach fisherman who said he saw the Jersey Devil serenading a mermaid.

The best known sightings however were in January 1909 when Councilman E.P. Weeden of Trenton claimed to have been awoken by flapping wings outside his bedroom window. The Councilman said he found cloven footprints in the snow and several other instances of similar footprints were reported in Trenton at the time. Hundreds, if not thousands, of other people also claimed to have seen the Devil within a week or so of the Councilman's "sighting" and news of the multiple sightings were reported in local papers. The January 1909 sightings were not limited to New Jersey...there were reported sightings across the river in Pennsylvania and some sightings in Delaware as well.

In 1978 two teenage boys were ice-skating near Chatsworth in the Barrens and smelled an odor like "dead fish" and saw two red eyes staring at them. They didn't stay around to investigate, but claimed they had encountered the Jersey Devil.

A number of people have claimed, not to have seen the Devil, but to have heard him, rampaging through woods, or emitting blood-curdling cries.

People have found "strange" tracks and attributed them to the Jersey Devil. One instance of such tracks was reported, (along with loud shrieks), near May's Landing in 1960. Also in 1960, merchants in Camden offered a \$10,000 reward for the capture of the Jersey Devil. They said they would build a private zoo to display the creature if anyone could capture it. The reward is unclaimed.